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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the ways in which members of different ethnic groups decode the worldwide hit television program Dallas, and suggests answers to the question of how such a quintessentially American cultural product crosses cultural and linguistics frontiers so easily. The program was studied with the intent of observing the mechanisms through which people understand, interpret, and evaluate a program; to compare such understandings across cultures; and to determine how American programs manage to engage and enter the lives of widely different kinds of viewers. Groups of six persons--three couples, all friends, meeting in the home of one of them--were drawn from four ethnic communities in Israel and one non-ethnic group of Americans in Los Angeles to discuss an episode of Dallas immediately after seeing it on the air. Based both on the literature and on the reactions of these viewers, discussion of ways in which Dallas invites viewer involvement considers parallels between the soap opera and the story of Genesis as well as the operation of seriality at both the semantic and the metalinguistic levels. It is concluded that Dallas offers viewers at different levels and in different cultures something they can understand from within themselves--not just an elementary understanding of the story as a drama of human relationships, but different types of understanding that are related to different types of involvement; and that the multiple levels of understanding and involvement of such programs offer a wide variety of different projects and games to different types of viewers. (13 references) (CGD)

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Dallas and Genesis: Primordiality and Seriality in Popular Culture

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We have been studying the ways in which members of different ethnic groups decode the worldwide hit program, 'Dallas'. Our interest in this problem arose, originally, from the question of how such a quintessentially American cultural product crosses cultural and linguistic frontiers so easily. Despite the universal popularity of American films and television, and the allegations of cultural imperialism which accompany their diffusion, almost nobody has bothered to find out how they are decoded or indeed whether they are understood at all. Our subjects are persons of some secondary schooling drawn from four ethnic communities in Israel - Arabs, newly-arrived Russian Jews, Moroccan Jews and kibbutz members - and non-ethnic Americans in Los Angeles. Groups of six persons - three couples, all friends, meeting in the home of one of them - are asked to discuss an episode of 'Dallas' immediately after seeing it on the air. We have begun to conduct a parallel study in Japan - one of the few countries in which 'Dallas' failed - but do not yet have these results.

Obviously, this is not the research design that will lead to a conclusive answer to the secret of the popularity of American television overseas. We chose to study one such program, as a start, in order to observe the mechanisms through which people understand, interpret and evaluate a program, and to compare such understandings across cultures. As a result, we now have some good ideas about how people do these things, or more generally, how these programs manage to engage and enter the lives of widely different kinds of viewers.

Before we begin to report these findings, we wish to dismiss the widely-held view that the success of programs like 'Dallas' can be explained in terms of their simple-mindedness or in terms of their rich visual appeal. The fact is that the program is not simple at all - one must learn the complex relationships among the large number of characters, and one must learn how to make a coherent story out of the "staccato" series of scenes and subplots which are presented

to the viewer without benefit of narration. Moreover, the pretty pictures are by no means sufficient to an understanding of the narrative. One cannot decode the story without its words, and in Israel, for example, these words appear in subtitles in two languages, Hebrew and Arabic.

We think, rather, that the secret of 'Dallas' is in the ways in which it offers viewers at different levels and in different cultures something they can understand from within themselves.

We are not referring here to the superficial problem of understanding; in fact we find that all of the groups we studied have an elementary understanding of the story as a drama of human relationships, (Whether this is true of the whole world we cannot yet say, but we assume that it is). What we do wish to do here, is to distinguish first of all, among different types of understanding. Then we wish to show that these types of understanding are related to different types of involvement. Finally, we will argue that programs like 'Dallas' invite these multiple levels of understanding and involvement, offering a wide variety of different projects and games to different types of viewers.

I. On Viewer Understanding and Involvement

It is often remarked that 'Dallas' provokes conversation. An essay on 'Dallas' in Algeria, for example, (Stolz, 1983) argues that not only has the program replaced grandmothers' storytelling around the fireside; it has also made the Algerians talk. Our study documents this phenomenon extensively. A kibbutz member says that the secretariat of the kibbutz is occupied with talk of 'Dallas' on the day after the program. A new immigrant from Russia says that 'Dallas' is compulsory viewing for anybody who wants to be part of Israeli society!

What we want to say is that to view 'Dallas' overseas - perhaps even in America - is to view a program, and not - as certain critics think - to view moving wallpaper. It is, in fact, more than viewing a program: it is becoming engaged with a narrative psychologically, socially and aesthetically, depending on the background of the viewer. A first secret of the popularity of 'Dallas', therefore, appears to be its ability to activate very different kinds of viewers in ways which other programs apparently do not.

To analyze these different types of understandings and involvements, we adopted Jakobson's (1972) classificatory scheme together with Goffman's (1974) notion of frames and keyings to code the statements of the discussion groups (Liebes and Katz, 1986).

Thus, we distinguish, first, between the referential and the metalinguistic. In answer to our question, "Why all the fuss about babies?" some viewers refer to real-life and explain that families, especially rich ones, need heirs. Others say, using a metalinguistic frame, that babies are good material for conflict, and the narrative of soap opera needs conflict to keep going. Within the referential, we distinguish between real and ludic (or poetic, in Jakobson's sense) keyings. The one makes serious equations between the story and life, the other treats the program more playfully, subjunctively and interactively - turning the group discussion into a kind of psycho-drama. Making a further distinction within the referential, some viewers key the program normatively, judging messages and characters moralistically; others treat the program as observors and withold value judgments. The moralizing statements tend to be couched in the language of "we": "Their women are immoral; our Arab women would not behave that way ." Less moralizing statements, come either in the language of "they" - for those who generalize from the program to the universals of life - and in the language of "I" and "You" for those who treat program and life more playfully.

Applying these distinctions to viewers of different education and different ethnicity reveals how understanding and involvement may vary among groups. While all groups make many more referential than metalinguistic statements, the better-educated viewers use the metalinguistic frame much more. More educated viewers decode the program at two levels - referential and metalinguistic - thus involving themselves not only in the narrative but in its construction.*

Patterns of involvement vary by ethnicity as well. The more traditional groups - Moroccan Jews and Arabs - do not stray far from the referential. Even the well-educated among them make comparatively few metalinguistic statements. They accept the program as real, and deal seriously with its relationship to their own lives. The Arabs in particular discuss the program moralistically, and in terms of "them" and "us". This pattern of relating to the program is at once involving and defensive: the program is discussed referentially and seriously, but at the same time, it is rejected as a message. Even if this rejection serves as a buffer against the influence of the program, it nevertheless reflects a high level of engagement.

The American and kibbutz groups show an altogether different pattern of involvement. The rate of their metalinguistic statements is high, and their use of the referential is often in the ludic mode. Some of their dialogue reminds one of fantasy games.

Like the Americans and kibbutzniks, the Russians also have a high proportion of metalinguistic statements - the highest proportion, in fact. They are critical not only of the aesthetics of the story (comparing it unfavorably to Tolstoy and other literary sagas) but about the message, which they regard as an ideological manipulation. Beware, say the Russians, of the false message of the program. They tell us that the rich are unhappy because that's what they want us to think!

Note the difference between these forms of criticism and those of the traditional groups. The Arabs, as we have said, criticize the seeming real-life behavior of the characters as immoral but believe the surface message of the narrative that the rich are unhappy. This decoding is precisely what the Russian criticism warns against.

Curiously, however, when the Russians use the referential frame, they seem to set aside their ideological suspicions and treat the program, as the Arabs and Moroccans do, as if it were a documentary. Going even further than the traditional groups - who accept the program as the truth about Americans but reject the program as a portrayal of themselves - the Russians seem to be saying that entire classes of people - women, businessmen, etc. - behave as their 'Dallas' counterparts do. The seriousness of their sweeping universal generalizations from the program to life are altogether different from the ludic keyings of the Americans and kibbutzniks.

Thus, we see at least three different patterns of involvement in these decodings. The more traditional viewers remain in the realm of the real (and the serious), and mobilize values to defend themselves against the program. The more Western groups - the Americans and the kibbutzniks - are relatively more aware of, and involved in, the construction of the program, and deal with its reality more playfully. The Russians, fall in-between, being at once more meta-linguistic than the traditional groups and not as playful as the more Western groups.

It is evident that each pattern of involvement includes a mechanism of defense. The Arabs distance the program normatively. The Russians distance it ideologically. The Americans and kibbutz members distance it ludically. The Russians, Americans and kibbutzniks all distance it metalinguistically. We cannot answer the question whether these forms of distancing - any one or all -

reduce the extent of involvement in the program, although it is our impression that ludic and metalinguistic distancing - both of which push at reality - are less emotionally, but perhaps not less cognitively, involving. If this is true, then the non-Americans may be said to be more vulnerable to influence than the Americans who have high proportions of metalinguistic framings and ludic keyings. But we may be wrong. Perhaps the lowered defenses of the Americans make them more vulneralbe to ideological work.

Whatever the answers to this question, the fact that the program invites very different kinds of viewers - educationally and ethnically - to become involved in their several ways is the concern of this paper. We turn, therefore, to the next question, namely, what it is about a program like 'Dallas' - or perhaps what is it about the soap opera genre to which it is partially related - that makes this kind of multidimensional participation possible.

In attempting to answer this question, we are led by the viewers to two dimensions of the 'Dallas' genre, the semantic dimension which draws so heavily on primordial themes of human relations, and the syntactic dimension which regularly combines and recombines this set of basic relational elements to tell endless variations of the same story. In other words, we are suggesting that these two dimensions of the genre constitute invitations to the viewer to invest his emotions, empathy and expertise as a card-carrying member of a kinship group and to invest his imagination and puzzle-solving predilections in game of how they are going to do it this week.

We cannot claim to be discovering more than our colleagues have, and cannot prove that we were first. In fact, the idea of the universal appeal of soap opera as a drama of kinship in which we are all connoisseurs has been stated by others, both in general (McCormack, 1982) and with respect to programs like 'Dallas' (Morgan, 1985; Tracey, 1985). And the idea of seriality as a form

of aesthetic pleasure has also been stated, most recently by Umberto Eco. What we can say is that our point of departure does not proceed from content analysis of the text to some imagined reader supposedly constructed by the text, but inductively, from real readers - and the variations in their readings - to those aspects of the text which invite different levels of decoding and different forms of involvement. Thus we can show that Eco's two readers - the naive and the "smart", which ostensibly correspond to semantic and syntactic decodings, may, in reality, be the same persnn. To show that these two model readers can coexist in the same minds and hearts is one of the advantages of our method.

II. On How 'Dallas' Invites Involvement

Primordiality: 'Dallas' is a primordial tale, echoing not just soap opera, but the most fundamental mythologies. Consider the parallels, *mutatis mutandis*, between 'Dallas' and Genesis, for example. Just as our forefathers were the giants of their time, dividing the world among themselves, so the characters in 'Dallas' fill the whole of the frame, dwarfing governments and shutting out any aspect of the real world which they do not control. Hence the hopeless entanglement between business and family. The institutional differentiation with which we are familiar - where business and family are otensibly independent cnd the rules governing one do not apply to the other - are altogether absent in 'Dallas' where one buys up all the oil wells in Texas to bring one's estranged spouse back home.

We note that our more traditional viewers focus on the family in discussing 'Dallas' and ignore the business aspects which the more Western viewers perceive. But is it so wrong not to see business as separate from the family? And is it not correct when the Arabs in Israel and the Algerian Arabs make an equation between JR and the sheikhs of the Persian Gulf?

Returning to Genesis, consider the parallels between the brothers of 'Dallas' and the brothers in Canaan. Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, are all JRs and Bobbies or various combinations thereof. The brothers compete for their parents' blessing; each brother seeks to be named the official heir; each brother tries to outdo the other in the instrumental (not moral) tests that will prove his qualifications; the parents conspire, each with his favorite, and manipulate each other on behalf of their favorite; brothers and parents divide in their inclinations toward nature and culture, excess and moderation, wildness and domesticity.

In Canaan as in 'Dallas', the key women have problems with fertility; they repeatedly fail in the mission of producing an heir; they are forced to acquiese in the acquisition of other women's children; they have to endure the tension of the presence of these other women who are, often enough, their own sisters. Both in Canaan and in 'Dallas', there is concern for the continuity of the "house" (Levi-Strauss, 1983). In Canaan, this means seeking out alliances with distant kin in order not to assimilate locally; in 'Dallas' it involves making alliances with rival dynasties to subvert them from within.

A striking difference between the two texts is that the women in Canaan have a lot more influence on their husbands, both directly and indirectly, than the women in 'Dallas', who are basically victims. Another difference, we think, is that the Bible prefers the sedenatry home lovers - the studious, the dream-decoders and the 'dwellers in tents' - to the hunters and the dionysians of 'Dallas'. We refrain from pronouncing 'Dallas' more archaic than Genesis, but that would seem to be the case. 'Dallas' is the Id Unbound. Unlike the rest of soap opera, the hero of 'Dallas' is a villain whom Fielder (1982) for one, would find compatible with his theory that the best of popular culture - including media culture - is subservise of the bourgeois order, even if the message is regressive rather than progressive.

The viewer has no trouble entering this world, and sometimes he perceives these Biblical parallels. Thus, Cain and Abel are sometimes mentioned explicitly.

Even without explicit mention of sources, the mythic reverberations figure in many of the group discussions. For example, Ayad in one of the Arab groups (#40) tells the 'Dallas' story as follows: "It's about a rich family who have a large inheritance. They have oil, and two sons. The older son is a cheat. He wanted to grab control of all the wealth of his father and mother. The younger one tried to share in the property but the older one schemed and plotted to get the money. And the two brothers quarrelled." Notice how this quote omits the name of the characters in favor of their primordial roles, and how familiar it all sounds to teller and listener.

A more sophisticated version of this same kind of telling is Eitan's in one of the kibbutz groups (#80). "He was the elder son, and it's as if he was constantly trying to prove his worth to his parents. There was another (a third) brother whom the mother loved, and baby Bobby was loved by the father. The whole story of an eldest son who tries to show that he's stronger and better ... Underneath his tough exterior is just a frightened child who has to prove again and again that he's bigger and stronger than everybody else. Because he himself doesn't believe in his own strength."

Even at the referential level, even when the mythic is involved, there are different levels of sophistication, different theories that are invoked in telling, attributing motivation and interpreting, and a different selection of issues that are focused upon. But sophisticated or not, mythic or not, we all are connoisseurs of these human relations and the psychology, sociology and politics that define them. In other words, all viewers - each at his own level of sophistication and embedded in his own culture - will find familiar the

narrative of the embroilments of kinship, and can become involved in how these characters are organizing their lives by comparison with all of the other kinship texts we know - our own, our neighbors, and our forefathers. It is likely that these kinship stories become so engrossing that the rest of social and political reality are shut out and not missed. This clearly has a political consequence.

Seriality: Our involvement in these characters and their stories does not only reflect their enactment of human texts which are familiar to us but reflects no less our week-to-week familiarity with them. We are connoisseurs not just of the situation but of these very people, who visit us so regularly. This brings us at the referential level to the serial structure of these programs. The familiarity which results from these weekly visits leads, for one thing, to what is known as para-social interaction (Horton and Wohl) whereby people talk back to the characters appro-vingly or disapprovingly, wishing them well or ill, urging them on, warning them of danger, worrying about the shame they will bring upon themselves. Indeed, seriality at the referential level often puts the viewer in a position where he knows more about a character than the character knows about himself, thus increasing the impetus of the viewer to communicate with the character.*

The open-minded nature of the family serial, of course, distinguishes it from some of the formulaic constraints of the series in which each story is self-contained and has to be resolved within 50 minutes. This allows for greater character development, more ambiguity, and more complexity. In a word, soap opera is more like reality, and it is no wonder that the stories enter into the realm of gossip. Moreover, the incomplete nature of each episode which leaves us hanging on a cliff is reminiscent of the Zeigarnik ( ) effect which posits that interrupted tasks are better remembered than completed ones. This

is yet a further dimension to help explain the active nature of reader involvement in serial narratives, as literary theorists (Iser, 1978) have already noted.

Seriality as an invitation to viewer involvement operates not just at the semantic level but also at the metalinguistic level. At this level, viewers can name the genre and compare it to others; they can define its attributes and dramatic conventions such as its division into subplots woven around characters and the staccato succession of two- and three-person dialogues. While the Americans compare the dynamics of 'Dallas' to those of other television dramas, the Russians use literary references much to the detriment of 'Dallas'. From our study, it is clear that television viewers are much better critics than they are usually given credit for. They become quite involved in these analyses and comparisons, which are often emotionally loaded. Indeed, some viewers show considerable sophistication about the constraints which operate on producers. Thus, certain kinds of viewers can identify the elements out of which the story is constructed and the characters created. In other words, viewers in the metalinguistic frame can do what they do not do in the referential frame, namely, to put the pieces together - to combine and recombine them - as the writers do, while managing, nevertheless, to switch back and forth from the the referential to the metalinguistic.

The key to viewer involvement at this level is in the realization that the story is like a contest in which the outcomes can repeatedly change or like a game in which the pieces can be put together in different ways. For long periods of time, the pieces are the characters as given - in number, gender, personality and kinship roles. These characters can be rotated through an elementary series of changing problems and relationships which are necessary to keep the story going. Viewers who relate to the program at this level become

interested in how the characters will next confront a problem or each other. Consider Deanna (American group #9) who says "Now it seems that Katherine has got her eye on Bobbie, and in this one episode there is just a little bit of hint she will have her way." Continuing her thought, Jill says, "This will snap Pam out of her depression fast enough," And Deanna adds, "Or put her into a worse one."

Another viewer, Greg (American group #3) sees a see-saw of domination and subordination at work. He says it's like a wrestling match. "The bad guys keep squashing the good guys using all the dirty tricks and then every once in a while some good guy will resort to the bad guy's tricks and, you know, stomp on the bad guys for a while, and all the crowd.wil go yeah yeah yeah and then the next week the bad guys are on top again squashing the good guys." Greg's involvement is in his intellectual perception of the program as contest, and not in the emotions of soap opera. In the longer run, the characters themselves are changed, and viewers get the idea that the true building blocks, or pieces, of the puzzle may not be the characters as given once-and-for-all but structural attributes which are redivided among the characters. Thus, the good and the bad guys may not only struggle for domination but actually exchange roles. This kind of jig saw puzzle or Lego set or computer game invotes the metalinguistic viewer to anticipate the combinatorial possibilities and to stay with the program to prove himself right. This is quite different, obviously, from the linear model of Proppian (1968) narrative.

III. Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to review the argument of the paper and to point out some theoretical implications and certain problems that remain unsolved.

To begin with, we should remind ourselves, perhaps, that we are here trying to explain the near-universal popularity of programs like 'Dallas'. We are not dealing at all with the question of effect. Our argument then, is as follows:

1. People talk about 'Dallas'; the program seems to provoke conversation. We have evidence of this from research in a number of cultures (Algeria, Denmark). It is also a basis for talk across cultures, of which this paper is itself an example.

2. We have tried to simulate this talk in group discussions among viewers in different ethnic contexts. Analyzing these discussions, we find a majority of statements in the referential frame, and a lesser number in the metalinguistic frame. Some groups concentrate almost exclusively on the referential; others switch from one frame to the other. Within the referential, we further identified groups by whether their statements are "serious" or "playful"; whether they are statements about the collectivity, the universal or the personal; and whether they involve normative judgments or not. Taken together, these distinctions yield several different patterns of involvement ranging from the referential/serious collective/moralistic on the one hand, to the metalinguistic/ludic/personal/value-free on the other, and in-between types.

3. Examining these statements in an attempt to identify what in the story motivates conversation and involvement, we identify two major clues; the one we call primordiality, the other seriality. Primordiality evokes in the viewer an echo of the human experience and makes him an instant connoisseur of the 'Dallas' variations on the elementary forms of kinship and interpersonal relations. Seriality is an obvious invitation to involvement in the regular visits of familiar characters, in the gossip of anticipation, and in discovering the rules of the producer's game.

4. It is wrong to assume that the referential deals only with the primordial, and the metalinguistic only with the serial. Rather, the influence of the primordial can be discerned both in the referential and metalinguistic, and the same thing is true of the serial. Thus, the primordial theme of kinship appears not only in reference to real-life but also, as we have shown, in intertextual references as well, both explicit and implicit. Similarly, the influence of seriality appears not only in viewers' critical awareness of how such a program is constructed but also in the many ways in which the characters and the narrative come to be accepted as real. We are arguing, in other words, that both the semantics of primordiality and the syntactics of seriality may be framed as "real" or as "text."

5. While Eco's distinction between the mythic and the strategic seems to correspond to our primordial and serial, we find ourselves in disagreement with his exclusive attribution of the mythic to the "naive" reader and of the syntactic to the "smart" reader. For better or worse, real readers insist on behaving more ambiguously than the roles that theory assigns them. This is the point at which to recall that we have two kinds of readers; those who remain almost exclusively in the referential frame, and those who commute between the referential and the metalinguistic. What we are now saying is that the primordial content of 'Dallas' makes the referential reader more involved in reality, but so does its serial structure. That is, referential readers treat the characters as real not only because of semantics but because of syntactics. For those readers who commute to the metalinguistic, we are suggesting that the serial structure gives them ample material for syntactic games but also that the primordial content allows them to play semantic games such as intertextuality.

6. We cannot here presume to solve the aesthetic problem of how commuting is possible, that is, how viewers can be involved at once in the reality of the

narrative and in the strategies of its construction. One suggestion, however, arising from the present study calls attention to the compatibility of the family saga and the serial form. The naturalness of this fit would explain why the referential readers are so little disturbed by the ostensible artificiality of the construction. It may also explain why the commuters find it possible to move from the referential to the metalinguistic and back. The kinship story, obviously, repeats itself in reality and we become aware of the structure of sameness and variation in real-life repetitions. It is an easy step from this reflexive position to thoughts of combining and recombining. It is another easy step from these thoughts to the awareness that the serial form is doing exactly this.

7. Returning, finally, to the question of global programs, this analysis suggests that both content and form of 'Dallas', and the relationship between them, are invitations to viewers of very different backgrounds to act as connoisseurs of life, or stories, or both. By cross-tablulating referential and metalinguistic frames with the semantic and syntactic we have illustrated four ways of relating to the story. Some viewers related in two of these ways (constrained to the referential by both semantics and syntactics) while others relate in three or four ways. The Americans seem to be most flexible in this respect. The non-Americans find it easier to remain at the referential level than the Americans because they are both less familiar with the genre and less likely to identify the unreality of the characters.

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